

# ***Children and Teens of Alcoholic Parents***

Growing from child to adult involves a complex dance of dependence and freedom, responsibility and boundary stretching, happiness and heartache. When that development is complicated by the emotional turmoil, neglect and even abuse that can come with having an alcoholic parent, the results can be devastating to a child or teen.

## **Resources for Children of Alcoholics**

According to the National Association for Children of Alcoholics there are at least six million children under the age of 18 who are currently living with active alcoholics. In many cases the problems of teens and children whose parents are addicted to drugs or gambling are similar to the children and teens of alcoholics. These children and teens are at risk for a number of problems, including:

- Their own abuse of alcohol or drugs:
  - ♦ Having a parent who is an alcoholic substantially raises the risk that a child will abuse drugs or alcohol. This may be due to increased stress or poor limit-setting by the alcoholic parent. The parent who is not alcoholic may have a difficult time monitoring a teen's alcohol or drug use due to the chaotic home environment. Teens of alcoholic or drug-addicted parents often gravitate to peer groups that are abusing substances.
  - ♦ There is mounting evidence of a genetic tendency to abuse alcohol that alcoholic parents pass on to their children. Children of alcoholics are four times more likely to develop a drinking problem than children of non-alcoholics.
  - ♦ Children growing up in alcoholic homes have a distorted view of alcohol's role in normal development. Children of alcoholics have a very high rate of binge drinking in high school and college.
  - ♦ Nearly one-third of alcoholics have a parent who is an alcoholic.
  - ♦ Adult children of alcoholics are far more likely to marry into families where alcoholism is present.
- A higher incidence of anxiety and depression:
  - ♦ Younger children of alcoholics often have problems with low self-esteem, bed wetting, nightmares and difficulty making and keeping friends.
  - ♦ Teen children of alcoholics are prone to isolation (staying in their rooms), anxiety problems like phobias (irrational fears) and eating disorders. They are often exceedingly self-conscious.
- A higher incidence of medical emergencies:
  - ♦ Inpatient admission rates for substance abuse are triple that of other children.
  - ♦ Inpatient admission rates for mental disorders are almost double that of other children.
  - ♦ Injuries are more than one-and-one-half times greater for children of alcoholics than for other children.
  - ♦ The rate of total health-care costs for children of alcoholics is 32 percent greater than for children from non-alcoholic families.
- Difficulties with school and learning:
  - ♦ Children of alcoholics, because of their poor self-image, often see themselves as failures.
  - ♦ Because they can have trouble expressing themselves, children of alcoholics may have difficulty in school even though they are not less intelligent than other children. They tend to score lower on tests that measure cognitive and verbal skills. This also may be because the alcoholic home environment often is not educationally stimulating or conducive to learning.
  - ♦ Children whose mothers abused alcohol during pregnancy can have fetal alcohol syndrome, which introduces a number of serious difficulties in learning, behavior and intelligence.
  - ♦ Children of alcoholics are more likely to be truant, drop out of school, repeat grades or be referred to a school counselor or psychologist. This may have little to do with intelligence or academic

ability: they can have difficulty bonding with teachers and other students and often experience anxiety related to fear of failure.

- ♦ The ability to understand abstract concepts and utilize conceptual reasoning skills plays an important role in problem solving, whether the problems are academic or are related to the problems of life. Because children of alcoholics may have difficulty in these areas, they often require explicit, concrete explanations and instructions.

### **The Life of a Child of an Alcoholic**

Although every home, even an alcoholic home, is different, there are some common themes that run through the home lives of children with alcoholic or addicted parents. Some of these are:

- A strained relationship between parents, including separation and divorce:
  - ♦ Individuals who are separated or divorced are three times as likely as married couples to have been married to a problem drinker.
  - ♦ Almost two-thirds of separated or divorced women and almost half of separated or divorced men under age 46 have been exposed to alcoholism in the family at some time.
- Exposure to violence and criminal activity:
  - ♦ Alcohol is a key contributing factor in 68 percent of manslaughters, 62 percent of assaults, 54 percent of murders and attempted murders, 48 percent of robberies and 44 percent of burglaries.
  - ♦ There is a high correlation among alcoholism, domestic violence and child abuse in alcoholic homes. Children of alcoholics frequently witness or are the targets of domestic abuse. Substance abuse is an issue in more than 81 percent of families where child abuse has been reported.
  - ♦ Because a high percentage of alcoholics also abuse drugs, families may come in contact with criminals and the justice system as a result of a parent's use of drugs.
  - ♦ Children of alcoholics are more at risk for disruptive behavioral problems and are more likely than other children to be aggressive and impulsive.

### **Intervention Can Help**

Children of alcoholics can benefit from the intervention of their non-alcoholic parent or a trusted teacher, therapist, coach or mentor. It is important for adults to help these children to:

- Develop autonomy, independence and improved social skills;
- Learn coping strategies that help them with their everyday problems;
- Learn more normal ways of getting along in the world by developing a close bond with an adult mentor. Because some children may have difficulty choosing trustworthy mentors, extra care should be taken to protect them from unscrupulous adults;
- Learn to put their experiences in a context that helps them understand the problems related to alcoholism in the family and to realize they are not the cause of these problems; and
- Become active in therapy and support groups such as Alateen.

### **Tips for the Non-alcoholic Parent**

The non-substance-abusing parent can improve the life of his or her child by:

- Establishing and observing healthy family traditions. Calm mealtimes, sober holiday celebrations, participation in extra-curricular activities like sports, art and music are all beneficial. Studies also have demonstrated the benefits of participation in athletics, hobbies or activities at a chosen place of worship;

- Maintaining a healthy balance in their own lives through participation in therapy or a self-help group such as Al-Anon;
- Setting limits and consequences with the alcoholic parent and following through with him or her;
- Making absolutely certain children do not ride with a parent who is under the influence;
- Working with a therapist on helping the alcoholic move toward recovery through a family intervention; and
- Supporting the alcoholic in his or her recovery while remembering to put the child's needs first.

## **Resources**

- National Association for Children of Alcoholics (NACoA): (301) 468-0985 or [www.nacoa.org](http://www.nacoa.org);
- Al-Anon and Alateen: (888) 4AL-ANON or [www.al-anon.alateen.org](http://www.al-anon.alateen.org); and
- Adult Children of Alcoholics World Service Organization (ACOA WSO): (310) 534-1815 or [www.adultchildren.org](http://www.adultchildren.org).

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